

Still in with a chance

By CHILTERN

TRANMERE ROVERS 0, LUTON TOWN 2

68/69

THERE can be no doubt about it. The Town are not going to let their chance of promotion, outside though it may be, escape without a fight. After their great win at Tranmere last night, the ball is now strictly back in Swindon's court, and they must now be looking a little worried.

After what can best be described as an uncertain first-half display in which they seemed to fall in between all-out attack and a yearning to reinforce the defence, the Town really turned it on immediately after the interval.

In the course of nine minutes they took a decisive two-goal lead, something which they had never promised earlier, and thereafter were never in real danger of losing their advantage.

There can be no doubt that they were deserving winners, because they always used the lively ball more effectively and with a good deal more accuracy than their opponents. Attendance was 6,723.

A recurrence of the ankle injury which Terry Branstón received last Saturday prevented him from playing, and the gap was filled by switching Alan Slough to centre-half and bringing in Keith Allen. Billy McDerment became the substitute.

With Tranmere in all white, the Town played in red shirts and black shorts, and were captained by Max Dougan. Surprise was that so far as numbers were concerned, Keen and Allen switched, which probably meant that manager Alec Stock was implementing what he said earlier in the week that the Town were going all out for two points.

The ground was hard, and the ball lively, which once

TEAMS

TRANMERE ROVERS:
Cumbes; Storton (S). Dempsey; Moorcroft, Storton (T), King; Rowland, Scott, Smith, Beamish, McNamee, substitute, Johnson.

LUTON TOWN: Read; Dougan, Bannister; Keen, Slough, Moore; French, Lewis, Buxton, Allen, Rioch, substitute, McDerment.
Referee, Mr. G. Singleton, of Preston.

again meant that there was much aerial football.

From the start, Rioch had taken over a midfield striking position, which meant virtually that the Town were operating without an outside left. In fact, Rioch seemed to have settled into a sort of halfway job as inside-right.

SLOW START

So far there had been no sort of hint of any goal intent from either side, and play in the first ten minutes could only be described as desultory.

When Tranmere attacked, Read grabbed a corner from McNamee at the second attempt, and then the Town came away with Keen passing to Lewis, whose centre was chipped on by Buxton. It needed a first-class clearance by Stan Storton to clear the lines.

Best chance so far fell to Allen, following a free-kick by Slough. The ball ran loose to the inside-left, who hit it wide.

There was a close thing at the Tranmere end when Lewis took a long throw in, which threw the Tranmere defence

into confusion. French stabbed the ball against a post, only to be penalised, probably for offside or it could have been for pushing.

So far no constructive pattern had emerged, and neither team could be said to have been dangerous, which meant that defences were much on top.

GREAT PASS

Then what had been largely ordinary scrappy play was lifted by a brilliant through pass from Allen, which Rioch just failed to reach, and was followed immediately by an equally good piece of distribution by King to Rowland. As the ball came across, McNamee closed in dangerously, but his shot was wild in the extreme, and flew yards wide.

At least these moves had given some uplift to the football which, frankly, had been boring.

A corner to Tranmere brought a header from Smith that Read saved comfortably enough, and then Buxton tried a speculative shot from 25 yards that went well wide.

So far it had been largely stalemate. The Town were certainly showing ideas about attack, but generally speaking they were not getting them very far.

With half an hour gone, the game had never really got off the deck, and it reminded me of two boxers sparring for openings and possible weaknesses, neither of which was appearing.

Then a bad back pass by King gave Lewis a chance to open up things by sending away French, from whose centre Lewis nodded the ball back to Rioch, whose shot was beaten down.

On balance, the Town were

working the ball slightly the better in midfield, and they gained a corner when Buxton challenged Moorcroft following a long throw-in by Lewis. This had the effect of keeping the Town on the attack for a spell, and a promising centre by French was headed clear by Trevor Storton.

Symptomatic of the complete lack of finishing power was a shot by Lewis from 25 yards, made when he could have reached closer range, and which ended at least five yards wide.

As half-time neared, Tranmere began to build up some pressure, earned a corner on the left, from which Smith headed over with none of the Town defence seeming to have a clear idea of where the ball was going.

Then there was as near a goal as there had been when Keen raced across to cut out a centre by Rowland, and might have put through his own goal. Then King beat the offside trap, left himself with only Read to beat, but inexplicably pulled the ball wide.

Perhaps encouraged by the fact that they had at last found some gaps in the Town defence, Tranmere began to play with more confidence, but the Town held out until half-time, with no difficulty.

Half-time:

TRANMERE 0
LUTON TOWN 0

It had been a disappointing first half for the Town, but they came out for the second on the rampage, and went ahead in the 47th minute. Start of it all was some panic in the Tranmere defence, which led to Trevor Storton conceding a corner. From this, taken by Lewis, Rioch had a shot saved at full length by Cumbes, who could only push the ball around the post.

From the second corner the ball ran loose and MOORE met it on the volley and it landed in the corner of the net, giving Cumbes no chance.

SO DIFFERENT

Certainly we were seeing a different Town altogether this half, and with 54 minutes gone they increased their lead through RIOCH. He ran on to a slide-rule through pass by Allen, drew Cumbes out of his goal and made no bones about placing it into the corner of the net.

This change was certainly a turn-up for the book, but the Town's approach had been altogether more positive this half, and they had accepted the chances that had come their way.

Again there was trouble for Tranmere, who were now showing what must have been to them a worrying gap down the middle. It was opened up by a long pass by Moore, and Cumbes was a little fortunate to grab the ball away from the oncoming Lewis.

After Tranmere had hit back, with Read saving well from Beamish, there was a real chance of the Town really sewing up this game when a bad goal kick by Cumbes, followed by a mistake by Trevor Storton, left Rioch with a chance which normally he would have gobbled up. This time, however, he seemed to try to make too sure, with the result that he over-ran the ball, and Cumbes was able to come out to clear.

Tranmere were still in fighting, and it needed a good save by Read to keep out a header from Smith after Dempsey had beaten French on the dead-line.

There seemed no immediate threat to the Town's lead, however. Tranmere were making little impression on the Town's sound defence, in which Slough was again playing an outstanding role.

As the game entered the last 10 minutes, the Town had a remarkable escape when, with Tranmere all out in attack, Read pushed out a ball which Smith met and Dougan acrobatically kept it out. The danger was not averted, and finally Read made an amazing save by pushing the ball over the top as Beamish smacked it in from point-blank range.